



Society : Maidenhead Operatic Society (MOS)
 Production : La Perichole
 Date : Thursday 18 May 2006
 Venue : The Desborough Suite, Maidenhead
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Report

I would like to start by thanking MOS for inviting me to review this production of Ian Gledhill's English translation of Offenbach's comic opera. Although popular in France, 'La Perichole' is not so well known here, and is not always the first choice of production for societies keen to reap the rewards of large box office returns. However, as a group with a growing reputation for occasionally performing shows a little out of the ordinary, MOS has decided to take that risk this time. Let's see how they fared...

JAMES COOPER JOHNSTON and LIZ HARDCASTLE (Piquillo and Perichole). James and Liz were very well cast as the impoverished street singers, and although perhaps not as young as the libretto suggests, they looked good and worked very well together, each apparently comfortable in the company of the other. Liz has a lovely fresh lyric soprano voice, which was working well tonight, and was able to bring out the comedy of her role as the show progressed, although I did think that she sobered up rather quickly after her drunk scene. James also has a fine tenor/high baritone voice and displayed a keen sense of comic timing, which was used to great effect during the drunken wedding scene. A perfect pairing of two fine actors, who, as the central characters of the performance, were able to keep the pace flowing nicely.

CATHY BROOKS, EVE MACDONALD AND CAROLINA TURRINI (Guadalena, Berginella and Mastrilla). Cast as the three cousins who run the village tavern, each of these ladies had fine voices that blended together well, particularly in their opening number 'Ready to Serve You'. They also appeared to work well together as a team, neither seeking to outshine the other, which helped to give us the impression they were indeed cousins. Carolina's native Italian accent was unusual compared to the rest of the cast's clipped English, but this didn't detract at all from the overall performance of the trio. Well done, ladies!

PETER KIDSON (Don Pedro, Governor of Lima). Peter is a fine Baritone, with a good command of the stage, making his presence felt whenever he entered or exited. His strong voice projected well and this, together with some fine acting and a good sense of timing, made him a very convincing Governor. Another good performance, Peter – keep up the good work!

BOB SPOONER (Count Panatellas). With the alternative title of *First Gentleman of the Bedchamber*, Bob brought the *Count* to life in fine style, with some nicely timed double-take looks to the audience. His light tenor voice projected well, and suited the music, and along with *Piquillo* and *Don Pedro*, he held an impressive harmony line throughout 'Now Gentlemen, There's No-one Near Us' An excellent supporting role, Bob!

PAUL SEDDON (Don Andres, the Viceroy of Pent). The Viceroy is a nice little comic role, and requires an actor who can 'multi-task' between humour and pathos. No problems here then for Paul, who has a natural talent for comic timing and a superbly expressive face, coupled with a apparently effortless knack for wringing every drop of sympathy for his plight from the audience. It was a shame that 'King With Morals From the Sewer' was set just a little bit to low for Paul's range, but he just about carried it off. Well done, Paul - this was another entertaining characterisation!

ROSEMARY ROBERTS, JACKY HART, JENNY HARRIS and JENNY WARREN (Ninetta, Frasquinella, Brambilla and Manuelita). As with the trio of cousins, these four 'ladies-in-waiting' worked extremely well together and each had a strong enough voice to be able to hold a harmony line in the opening two numbers in Act 2, both of which I thought were highlights in the show.

STUART SEBER and ROBIN BRATCHLEY (1st and 2nd Notaries). As two of the more minor supporting characters in the plot, **Stuart** and **Robin** worked well within their roles, each adding his own individual touch. Their drunken scene with *Piquillo* was particularly well-acted. Two more good supporting performances.

GRAHAM JOHNSTONE, BOB NICHOLSON and MIKE ROBINSON (Tarapote, Marquis de Santarem and Jailor). These were also three smaller, yet none-the-less important character roles and each of these gentlemen did their roles great justice. Graham had good vocal projection and worked well with his part, whilst Mike was also impressive as the wearied *Jailor*. Special mention, though, has to go to Bob Nicholson, who gave us a wonderful comic characterisation of the old and wizened prisoner – although it was a shame that he wasn't able to produce the sound of the pan pipes.

CHORUS (of Peruvians, Indians, Soldiers and Courtiers). Although non-speaking roles, the chorus must be relied upon to embellish the action by concentrating on everything taking place around them and reacting to it appropriately and being part of it. Although there was limited movement involved, tonight's chorus did just that and all appeared to know what they were doing and what was required of them.

DIRECTION (John Rigg). It's a bit of a difficult one to comment on, this. Although John has assembled a mainly experienced cast, and each suited their relevant roles, there didn't appear to be much in the way of purpose or direction happening tonight, with the actors sometimes appearing to fend for themselves, relying on their instincts rather than directed instruction – especially some of the minor principals. Unfortunately, this gave the production a rather lack-lustre feel at times, when the pace dropped (although *Piquillo*, *Perichole* and *Don Andreas* did a lot to liven up the action). I'm not sure whether the fact that the production was set in Peru but acted in Queen's English had anything to do with it, or whether the small audience with the resulting rather muted reception of the performance may have disheartened the cast, but there was definitely something missing. There were some highlights – the opening of Act 2, when the women were dressed in black was quite lively and well-paced, but apart from that, (and sorry to be so negative, John), the overall production lacked that certain something that MOS productions usually attain.

MUSICAL DIRECTION (David Hazeldine). As always, David's musical direction was sympathetic and sensitive, yet he had obviously rehearsed his cast and orchestra well. There were some very confident and strongly presented harmonies. The acapella chorus men in 'It's a Fate To Be Dreaded' was especially impressive. And despite there being no vocal amplification, the balance was so well done that all vocal parts could be heard quite clearly.

CHOREOGRAPHY (Claire Imrie). There didn't appear to any specialist dancers in the cast or chorus, so Claire had wisely kept the choreography to a minimum, and this worked well (especially with the men!). Generally, the routines suited their purpose and although at times, movement was a little static, everyone was able to cope with what they had been given (although giving the soldiers knee-dips to do as part of their routine may have been a bad move!).

LIGHTING (Andy Nicholson and Crew). As usual, Mr Nicholson and his team presented a most excellent contribution to the performance. The lighting for tonight's show was well designed to make us think that we were in the Peruvian Andes. There were only two notable problems: the first was a late lighting cue at the beginning of Act 3 Scene 2; and the other was that the lighting for the Dungeon scene in Act 2 was a rather too dim. Apart from that, well up to your usual standard, Andy!

STAGE MANAGEMENT/SCENERY and PROPS (Paul Graham, Karen Newton and Matilda Hobson). Stage Crew: you really must take extra special care when setting a scene behind a drop cloth, using torches – they **can** be seen, and are very distracting! Apart from that, the set was well designed. The removable section of wall in the Dungeon scene was well designed and worked perfectly. And was that *real* thatch on the Tavern roof in scene 1?

WARDROBE (Jenny Harris, Jenny Warren and Teresa Stanton). With the production set in sunny Peru, it was important that the cast were dressed appropriately and in the style of the colourful South American country. Tonight, we were treated to a whole host of colourful and appropriate attire. Particularly of note were the bright and coordinated opening chorus costumes, and the coordinating soldiers uniforms. There were a couple of things worth noting though: some of the men had Velcro-fastened sandals, which were very obviously modern and did look rather out of keeping with the period and the context of the rest of the costumes (the production did appear to be set in the original 18th century?); and although street singer *Piquillo* was supposed to look dirty, that was rather an embarrassing (and somewhat lonely) stain on your trousers, James! More grubbiness was called for, I think! Overall, though, I thought the costumes were colourful, appropriate and in keeping with the production, so well done to the wardrobe ladies!

WIGS & MAKEUP (Make Up: Ros Hazeldine). Generally, everything was in order tonight, with the ladies sporting a variety of dark wigs, hairpieces and pigtails, as would befit the inhabitants of Peru. The *Prisoner's* long grey beard and hair was also very realistic and convincing. I did however wonder, whether the make up base used could have been just a little darker, to reflect the South American colouring, as some of the chorus ladies in particular looked a little paler than others under the lights.

PROGRAMME (Rosemary and Derek Roberts). Tonight's programme was a glossy A5 brochure with a colourful photograph of a woman dressed in the bright native colours of Peru on the cover. The cast photographs reproduced well and there were some detailed cast resumé's. There was also a nice caricature of Offenbach on the introductory page (although no artist was quoted – watch that for copyright reasons!) and once more, some lively photographs of the cast during rehearsals – always a nice touch. Although maybe just a little bit too text-heavy this time, the inclusion of some interesting facts on Peru and the detailed synopsis did make the programme an interesting read. I also liked the faded background images on several of the pages – a pity this theme was not continued throughout, as it livened up the text. And once again, many thanks for including the half page information piece on NODA!

FRONT OF HOUSE (Alf Bramley, Liz Gibson and Friends of the Society). There was the usual friendly greeting from the FoH team – you always seem to have the most cheery and friendly bunch and it's not always obvious where one needs to be in the refurbished Desborough. Rest assured, your efforts are very much appreciated!

To sum up, this was a rather unusual production: an English translation of a French farce operetta set in Peru! It translated rather well to the Maidenhead stage, and it is such a shame that audiences seem to be willing only to turn out to watch what they have seen before. Despite the obvious lack of effective direction, this turned out to be a rather amusing evening's entertainment, thanks entirely to the dedication and talent of the cast, and MOS should definitely consider it a successful production, despite disappointing audience numbers. Good luck with 'The Card' in the autumn.

Kim Halliday